Modernism in Indian Literature

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Introduction: What is Indian Modernism?

Modernism in Indian literature, like Indian modernity, resists tidy definitions. Just as experiences of modernity outside the Western world have prompted accounts of ‘alternative’, ‘colonial’, or ‘vernacular’ modernities, literary modernism in India calls for a recognition of historical and locational specificities. A perplexing diversity of languages, communities and literary cultures, the continued life of oral traditions and uneven levels of literacy, and complexities of political and economic realities in postcolonial India confront attempts to chart modernism’s career in India. The category itself is Protean, displaying multiple meanings and accents in various regions and contexts; what follows is no more than a preliminary map aimed at an initial orientation.

Modernist departures in Indian writing, from their beginnings in the 1920s and 30s, moved away from idealised visions of the human and dominant idioms of nationalist belonging. The thirties also saw the emergence of Marxist literary efforts, with their insistent, critical foregrounding of social reality. Progressive Writers Association was founded in Lucknow in 1936, and similar outfits came up in many regional languages. Incipient modernism and early progressive writing overlapped in their stark estimation of reality and rejection their of literary decorum. Urdu modernists like Sa’adat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai had close associations with the progressives before they parted ways. The Kallol generation poets in Bengal provoked criticism not only for formal innovations but also for their preoccupation with “poverty and lust.”

The tone of disenchantment in modernist writing became more pronounced after India’s independence from British rule in 1947 and the massive violence that accompanied the partition of the country into India and Pakistan; Manto’s extraordinary stories bore witness to the trauma of this moment. The decades that followed saw an erosion of faith in the nationalist dream: the utopian aura of the freedom movement gave way to disillusionment with a nation-state which increasingly centralised power and authority, denting the hopes of emancipation, justice and equality upheld by two previous generations of writers.

In literary historical terms, modernism was a reaction to romanticist and realist strands, critiquing the ‘false simplicity’ of their conceptions of the self, the social and the literary, and introducing radical innovations in literary form and themes. Urban experience and the absence of a sense of community figured prominently in this new imaginary. Large-scale migration to cities altered the demography of Indian villages and undermined their Gandhian idealisation. Alongside this, was an increasing manifestation of the mercantile and predatory facets of Indian bourgeoisie. Many modernist writers were of rural origin who moved to fast growing, complexly hybrid Indian cities. They forged images of individual selfhood that stood in isolation from a hostile world. D. R. Nagaraj observed: “When ideologies like nationalism and spirituality become the apparatuses of the state, a section of the intelligentsia has no option other than to seek refuge in bunkers of individualism.” Literary modernism, with its formal preoccupations and focus on the individual, had an elitist character to begin with, but its oppositional content gradually drew into its ranks writers from lower classes and castes who found its avant-garde idiom liberating.

Cosmopolitanism and Indengeneity

Literature from England, North America and Europe offered important resources for Indian modernists. Many of them were teachers of English literature, which brought them into direct contact with Anglo-American modernist writing. T. S. Eliot was a prominent influence: poems indebted to *The Wasteland* in formal organization, imagery and the tenor of emotions were written in many Indian languages. Although they did not share Eliot’s political or religious beliefs, the authors of these poems often sought resonance in his search for a literary form which linked classical poetic traditions and the contemporary moment’s decisive rupture with the past.

Tradition, however, placed serious questions before the Indian writer: there was the problem of its availability after the colonial interregnum; there was also the question of the identity and unity of an Indian tradition: was Indian tradition to be conceived in classical, Sanskrit terms? Did it not exclude local cultural lineages, vernacular inheritances, non-Sanskrit classical traditions like Tamil, and Indo-Persian legacies? Was a unified, effective tradition available at the national level? And, was tradition not an oppressive burden with its association with naturalised inequalities, discrimination in gender and caste, and tyrannical control over individual liberties?

In the Indian writer’s engagement with these questions, Western modernisms did play the role of a catalyst; however, the urge to ‘make it new’ came primarily from the depths of the indigenous contexts. Amiya Dev has observed that “Bengali modernism was not Western modernism in Bengali dress, it was Bengali writing after Rabindranath in modern dress.” Indian modernists read their western predecessors in unorthodox ways, looking for an intense, local, contemporary purchase. Along with literature, a host of intellectual currents were invoked, including Freud and Marx, who impacted ways in which individual and social realities were conceived. This cosmopolitan engagement was not confined to the West: Progressive writing invoked an alternative set of global connections that reached out to the communist and third world countries. Translations from Africa and Latin America played a vital creative role, especially in the sixties and seventies.

Poetry

A timeline can be tentatively drawn for modernist poetry in India: trends that surfaced in Bengali and Marathi poetry in the thirties spread to Hindi in the forties, Kannada in the fifties, Malayalam in the late fifties and early sixties, Gujarati in the late sixties and so on. In Bengali, modernism’s new poetics – with free verse as its principal medium – was distinguished by the use of everyday idioms as opposed to a highly formalist Sanskritised diction, a preoccupation with the city as a locus of alienation and angst, an ironic detachment that complicated one’s relations with tradition, and an irreverent approach to sexuality and desire. Individual members of the modernist group differed from each other in fundamental ways. Budhadeva Bose, Sudhindranath Dutta and Bishnu Dey consciously moved away from Tagore’s legacy while Jibanananda Das valued Rabindranath as a continuing source of inspiration.

G. M. Mardhekar (1909-1956) transformed Marathi poetry’s expressive format and thematic focus. His path-breaking *Kahi Kavita* (1947) forged a poetic mode which simultaneously reclaimed the *abhang* mode of the medieval *bhakti* poetry and captured the psychological disorientation and political disillusionment experienced by the common man in the urban turbulence of Bombay. Mardhekar was followed by a group of accomplished modernists in Marathi, which included P. S. Rege, G. V. Karandikar, Sharat Chandra Muktibodh, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, each distinct in his inventiveness.

In Hindi, Agyeya (S. H. Vatsyayan) began his poetic career by countering the poetics of the romantic-nationalist *Chhayavadi* group of poets. He emphasized a poetic of hermetic insularity where art kept self-conscious distance from the domain of the popular, indicated by the title of his 1951 collection, *Nadi ke Dvip* (Islands in the Stream, 1951). G. M. Muktibodh was intellectually an optimist who put his faith in the communist movement, but articulated a distraught self entangled in the web of morbidity and dissolution with no redeeming vision to temper his world-view articulated in his *Andhere Main* (In the Darkness)*.*

South Indian languages saw the emergence of strong modernist poets in the 1950s. In Kannada, Gopalakrishna Adiga published his pioneering collection *Nadedubanda Daari* in 1952, while *Mahaprasthanam* by Srirangam Srinivasa Rao, widely known as ‘Sri Sri’ announced a new departure in Telugu in 1950. *Kurukshetram* (1960), a long poem by Ayyappa Paniker became a landmark of modernist poetry in Malayalam.

A significant body of English poetry emerged within Indian modernism, of which Nissim Ezekiel’s explorations of life in Bombay are perhaps the best known. Some of these poets were brilliantly bilingual, like Arun Kolatkar. Translation was vital to the modernist intervention, and several major poets avidly used it as a resource to transform sensibilities and alter poetic idioms.

Experiments in modernist poetry ran parallel to the innovations introduced by avant-garde painters and sculptors: many of them were closely associated with poets, or were poets themselves (such as Ghulam Muhammad Sheikh in Gujarati, Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre in Marathi and Kamala Das in Malayalam). They shared an insistent pursuit of abstract images and a personal sense of the morbid and the uncanny unredeemed by faith or ideology.

Fiction

The novel and the short story – an especially strong genre in many Indian languages – became important sites of experimentation in the decades after independence. However, it is not easy to see modernism in a simple oppositional relationship with realism. Major Bengali novelists of the sixties like Satinath Bhaduri, Advaita Mallabarman, and Kamal Kumar Majumdar retained their links with the realist tradition even as they extended the scope of the literary expression.

If a preoccupation with the individual subject in disjunction with society is the mark of modernist fiction, Agyeya’s two-volume Hindi novel *Sekhar: Ek Jeevani* (1941 and 1944) is a seminal example. The modernist legacy in Hindi fiction later produced the intricately crafted novels of Nirmal Verma and Krishna Baldev Vaid. In Marathi, Bhalchandra Nemade’s influential novel *Kosala* (1963) combined striking innovations in language and narration with a fictitious autobiographical mode.

Moral conflicts of the individual in relation to social norms formed the centre of modernist fiction in Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil. The figure of the anti-hero haunted by bad faith and threatened by a sense of fragmentation appeared prominently the fictional works of Krishna Baldev Vaid, M. Mukundan (Malayalam), Suresh Joshi (Gujarati), G. A. Kulkarni (Marathi), Pudumaipithan and Mauni (Tamil). Paperbacks of novels by Kafka, Camus and Sartre in English translations became available in metropolitan centres in India from the fifties, and existentialist thought was influential in shaping modernist imagination. However, the best of the new fiction showed a strong sense of location – be it understood in civilizational or contemporary terms – as in the novels of U. R. Ananthamurthy (Kannada), O. V. Vijayan (Malayalam) and Sundara Ramaswamy (Tamil). In the 1970s and 80s, situatedness acquired a more pronounced political dimension. The Bengali novelist Mahasweta Devi’s novels and stories, which incisively explore the predicament of adivasis and landless labourers in independent India, is a powerful instance.

Drama

Modernist drama in India rehearses some of the tensions and ambivalences we saw in other genres. By virtue of its integral relationship with performance, experimentation in drama had a closer encounter with the diverse traditions of performing arts in the country. This is however, not to deny the impact of modernist theatre from the West and of political theatre, especially that of Bertolt Brecht. Often these two strands came together in stylized plays with a contemporary, political intent. The Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar wrote emotionally intense plays with urban domestic settings as well as the historical play *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1972), which used the resources of the Tamasha form for political satire.

The renowned Kannada playwright Girish Karnad also turned to history, indigenous narrative traditions, and performance forms such as the Yakshagana to write plays that explored questions of selfhood and politics in contemporary India. Problems of identity remained central to the work of Mohan Rakesh, whose play *Ashadh ka Ek Din* (1958) is regarded as the first modernist play in Hindi. The Bengali writer and theatre director Badal Sarkar wrote and produced plays such as *Ebom Indrajit* with a radical anti-establishment politics.

The work of Kavalam Narayana Paniker from Kerala turned to local performance forms as well as to classical Sanskrit theatrical traditions. Ratan Thiyam from Manipur and the “theatre of roots” movement show a similar turn to Indian performance traditions. Manipur – and the political situation in the North East of India – has also produced powerfully political and highly stylized plays, like those of Heisnam Kanhailal.

While English translations of modernist plays in Indian languages brought them recognition at the national level, it was their production in Hindi by highly talented directors like Ebrahim Alkazi that made them landmarks in the national history of Indian performing arts.

Little Magazines

Little magazines were vital to the life of modernist writing in India. They enabled poets to produce and reach out to a new public, outside the mainstream. In Bengali, a number of little magazines such as *Kallol* (1923-1930), *Kali O Kalam* (1926-29), *Pragati* (1927), *Parichay* (1931) brought about a shift in prevailing poetic themes and modes of expression. The next generation of avant-garde poets like Shakti Chattopadhyay were associated with *Krittibas*.In Hindi, Agyeya edited the little magazines *Pratik* (1947 onwards) and *Nayi Kavita* (1954 onwards), in addition to the path-breaking anthology, *Tar-Saptak*. In Malayalam, *Kerala Kavita, Sameeksha* and *Anweshanam* played a crucial role in creating a modernist sensibility in the initial phase. Major modernist poets M. Govindan, Ayyappa Paniker, Madhavn Ayyapath, Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, N. N. Kakkad, K. Satchidanandan, and K. G. Sankara Pillai were all associated with various poetry journals and literary groups.

Social and Political Locations

In India, modernism was a site of multiple political strands: the conservative and the iconoclastic co-existed, as evidenced by Agyeya, a humanist committed to universal values in life and art, and Muktibodh, a committed Marxist who had no use for the baggage of tradition. Gopala Krishna Adiga in Kannada satirised romantic poets of the Navodaya movement as “inmates of an ancient house” full of “stale stench” and “excess of incense and smoke”; however, the sixties saw him become a staunch supporter of the political right. Samar Sen, a communist and Jibanananda, a formalist of exceptional craftsmanship, were both Bengali modernists. Such paradoxes arguably reflected the self-contradictions of Indian middle classes.

The relationship between modernist writing and social identities is complex: in Kannada, for instance, modernism developed a distinctively anti-Brahmanical, lower caste strand, drawing its energies from contemporary social and political criticism. Curiously, in neighbouring Tamil literary culture, in spite of the strength of the anti-Brahmanical Dravidian movement, modernist initiatives were dominated by elite Brahmin writers.

Politically, modernists differentiated themselves from social realism and the cultural policies of communist parties; nonetheless, many writers show a search for fresh coordinates of social commitment and allied themselves with new forms of left politics. In Kannada, Rammanohar Lohya’s thought, with its attempt to forge a distinctively Indian idiom of socialism, was influential on several writers of Ananthamurthy’s generation. In the wake of the curtailment of civil liberties during the National Emergency (1975-77) and the rise of Maoist insurrections in the late sixties and seventies, a younger generation of radical modernist writers began addressing political questions largely ignored by the modernists of the 60s. Among them were poets such as Dhoomil (Hindi), K. Satchidanandan and K. G. Sankara Pillai (Malayalam), Pash (Punjabi) and the Hungry generation poets of Bengal who were influenced by Allen Ginsberg, as well as fiction writers like Pattathuvila Karunakaran and M. Sukumaran (Malayalam).

Making It New

New avenues in exploring sexuality were opened by Indian modernists: their writing showed an acknowledgement of the intense claims of sexual desire and non-normative sexual practices. This also prompted a critique of marriage as an institution, not necessarily from the point of view of a superior romantic relationship. Most of this was articulated from a male standpoint, as Indian modernism was overwhelmingly dominated by male writers. Distinctive strands of women writing and feminist critique of patriarchy and modern domesticity appeared with Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Qurratulain Hyder, Ismat Chughtai (Urdu), Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), Kamala Das and Sara Joseph (Malayalam).

There have been attempts to invoke a concept of “uttar-adhunikata” (post-modernism), but the term does not stand in the same relationship to modernism as in Anglo-American or European literatures. In Bengali, the term was coined by Amitabha Gupta in 1985 in the sense of a successor rather than an antagonist of adhunikata (modernism), characterized by a distancing from Eurocentric conceptions of modernism and a more pronounced orientation towards the indigenously historical and the socio-cultural. Ayyappa Paniker identified “adhunika-uttara” poetry in Malayalam as marked by a turn away from mythological traditions to elevating the contemporary to the status of a myth in its own right.

Dalit writing, emerging from communities discriminated against as untouchables by caste Hindu society, has since the 1970s produced an intensified radical phase that challenges and extends modernism. Even as the emancipatory dynamics of modernist writing prepared the grounds for their reception, Dalit writers moved away from modernism in reclaiming a community of the oppressed and addressing questions of marginality and social stigma. The pioneering Marathi Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal, in *Golpeetha* (1973), used the language of the urban slum to devastating effect and overturn established norms of decorum and dominant conceptions of literary experience. Dalit writing in Marathi, Hindi, Kannda and Tamil has drawn on fresh sources for formal experimentation, deriving its energies from indigenous subaltern forms, the mode of the testimony and a reassessment of realism.

Timeline

1923 Bengali literary journal *Kallol* begins publication.

1936 Founding of progressive literary association.

1941 Agyeya’s *Sekhar, Ek Jivani*, vol. 1.

1942 Jibananda Das’s *Banalata Sen*

1943 The publication of the modernist anthology *Tar Saptak*

1947 The partition of India; India and Pakistan become independent.

1947 Mardhekar’s *Kahi Kavita*

1952 Adiga’s *Nadedubanda Daari*.

1953 The publication of the Bengali poetry journal *Krittibas*.

1960 Ayyappa Paniker’s *Kurukshetram*

1965 U. R. Ananthamurthy’s novel *Samskara*

1967 Maoist uprising in Naxalbari

1972 Marathi Dalit Writers form Dalit Panthers

1975-77 National emergency in India

1977 Mahasweta Devi’s novel *Aranyer Adhikar*

Further Reading

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